Handle With Care
by Alexander Lozupone

PROLOGUE

Ten-thirty on a Monday morning in November of 1965, Zooey Glass, a young man of thirty-five, was seated in a very full bath, reading a four year-old letter. It was an almost endless-looking letter, typewritten on several pages of second-sheet yellow paper, and he was having some little trouble keeping it propped up against the two dry islands of his knees. At his right, a dampish-looking cigarette was balanced on the edge of the built-in enamel soapcatch, and evidently it was burning well enough, for every now and then he picked it off and took a drag or two, without quite having to look up from his letter. His ashes invariably fell into the tub water, either straightaway or down one of the letter pages. He seemed unaware of the messiness of the arrangement. He did seem aware, though, if only just, that the heat of the water was beginning to have a dehydrating effect on him. The longer he sat reading - or re-reading - the more often and less absently he used the back of his wrist to blot his forehead and upper lip.

This scene was a very familiar one to Zooey, yet a very distant one as well. It has been many years since he truly read this letter, and it caused a great disturbance in his life like this one to remind him of it. His life had not changed vastly since he had last read the letter. He still lived with his parents, although even his younger sister, Franny, had moved out. He seemed to have no real reason to leave the house, and therefore, didn't.

At this point, his concentration was broken by the openning of the bathroom door. Of course, this was his mother, coming in for a chat as she does tend to do.

"What courtesy you have that you ask permission to come barging in on me at such a time when I have so little to do!" He started to organize the pagee of the letter into a neat pile on his knee. "What privacy I have in this wonderful bathroom, where I can not only relax in piece and quiet, but also can have heartwarming discussions with such wonderful company as Bessie."

"What do you think I should do about notifying everyone?" Mrs. Glass wandered over to the cabinet, opening one of its doors, for no apparent reason other than to do something physical.

"Just call them, Bessie. Isn't that usually how you tell people of something? Pick up that wonderful invention called the phone, dial their number, and start talking to them." Zooey started folding the pages of the letter into quarters, so he could then put them into the envelope. "After all, its not like the rest of us Glass siblings lack phones like Buddy did. He IS what you are supposed to be notifying everyone about, remember?"

Mrs. Glass looked down at the floor, but found no consolation there. "I just don't see why he had to go and do something like that. Didn't he see how badly Seymour messed us up? Can't he learn from other people's mistakes?"

"I'm actually kinda glad he did it. Buddy was so damn indecisive. He would be like Seymour, but not as much. He followed in his footsteps, and then didn't. At least he finally made a god-damn decision, y'know?" Zooey inserted the folded mass of paper into the envelope. "He never spoke to you anyway. He just kept to himself, and to quote you, he didn't even have a phone. The utter creep. Imagine not having a phone. I don't see how you can even miss him! I mean, if he didn't have a phone, he must've been the--"

"Now listen, Zooey, I'm sick of hearing you tell me all this stuff about how you didn't like Buddy, how he made you a freak, I just don't want to hear it." Mrs. Glass looked around, but could not find her freindly blue bathmat, and was actually feeling somewhat insecure about it. "Now, how do you think should tell the others? Who do you think's going to get the body? Should we have a funeral? What do you think?"

"I don't give a damn what happens with Buddy's funeral. As far as I'm concerned, he's been dead for years anyway. In fact, as long as Seymour's been dead. He just deserted us all. I don't know, maybe you can convince Waker to get the body, although somehow I don't the ink he'll be willing to oblige." Zooey at this point was reaching for the bar of soap, apparently feeling his body still had some dirt lying on it somewhere.

"Fine" was strangely Mrs. Glass's only retort, and had she wanted to see the most surprised expression possible, she needed look no further than the face of Zooey Glass, who happened to be sitting in the tub located a mere five feet away.

Zooey sat in something of a state of shock. Never, as far as he could remember, had Mrs. Glass finished a discussion of any sort so quickly, and so finally. For, if she had, he would remember it till this day. He then heard her shouting "And this is from your father," and was hit in the knee by a round, orange-colored fruit.

THE STORY

"Hey, Dad, can you give me a hand here?"

The shout came from a small boy named Chris. He seemed to be laboring over some sort of math problem, and needed some help urgently. Chris turned his head around, and saw exactly what he expected. The familiar blond man was wandering into the room, and seemed ready to help, had the problem been a small math problem, or a bomb which would go off in a few seconds. Chris was quite satisfied with this vision of his.

"What seems to be the problem, son?" was the first question which came to Lane's mind, so it was indeed the question he put forth to his son, Chris.

"This problem here... I can't seem to do it."

"Which one, this one?"

"Yes, father, this one. I keep getting the wrong answer here."

"Oh, let me see it... Hmm... I see the problem. The numbers here should be added using the order of operations, not the actual order. An understandable mistake. Is that all?"

"No..."

"Well then... What is it, son?"

"When are we gonna get to see Mommy?"

"I've already told you, not for another week. On this Saturday, to be exact. If those nice doctors think she's better, they might let her leave the hospital."

"I wanna see her now."

"You'll have to wait, son. Don't worry, everything will be just fine..."

The weather was wonderful at the time Sybil decided to have an argument with her

parents, which could have been good or bad. Good, if what Sybil needed was some fresh air, and some strong sunlight, which was definetely true. Bad, however, if Sybil also wanted some peace and quiet, which she most certainly did. For, the only place Sybil could think of to go was Central Park, a mere three blocks away from her home. On such beautiful days, however, privacy is a commodity one does not often find in Central Park. This was truly the case that day. It was at this time, while walking through the park deep in thought, that a voice distracted her.

"Excuse me, miss?" The voice which beckoned to Sybil was obviously that of a young man, perhaps in his early twenties, and seemed somewhat anxious.

"Yes?" sybil answered, turning towards the source of the voice, and feeling rather confused at the intent of this destruction of her thoughts.

"You look somewhat familiar. Have we met before?" She now got a good look of the man. He seemed to be around her age, and quite anxious to 'get to know her.' He was somewhat taller the she, and more built. There was also a sort of familiarity she was experiencing, which she could not quite place. The facial features looked somewhat familiar.

"I really don't think so..." Sybil had had more than her share of cliched come-on lines, and she could smell one a mile away. In fact, she attempted to detour around the young man, when something he shouted caught her interest.

"Yes! Yes! Now I remember! You babysit for my little cousin, Chris, right? What was your name again... Sybil! Yeah! That's it!" Enthusiasm nearly sprayed from the man's aura, along with great confidence.

At this point Sybil's interest was caught. While turning slowly around, she nodded her head, saying "Yes... And you are?"

"Lionel Tannenbaum, at your service!"

Zooey was looking through the large number of notes Seymour had jotted down on the shirt-cardboards located in his drawers, when he heard the talking. Without really thinking, he placed the cardboards haphazardly on the desk. He turned around, to see in the living room three new, yet, familiar faces. These faces he immdeiately recognized as his sister, Boo Boo, and her son, Lionel). He went out to greet Boo

Boo, more out of habit than anything else.

Boo Boo seemed quite pleased to see Zooey, and showed her feelings somewhat. However, Zooey did not involve himself in such 'superficial' happenings. In other words, no great big hugs and kisses for him. It was at this point when Zooey decided he would excuse himself from society, and explain that nature was taking his toll on him.

While Boo Boo and Mrs. Glass were happily chatting away, Lionel glanced over in the direction of the bathroom, where Zooey was headed. His curiosity was somewhat peaked when he could see other rooms in that general direction. This curiosity also got the better of him, so he wandered in the direction of these rooms. He, of course, chose to wander into the one furthest from the living room.

It had not occured to Lionel at that moment that he had a grandfather; at least, not one on his mother's side. Of course, he was wrong, and he realized this the instant he heard the voice from inside the room.

"How ya doin', Seymour?" was the question posed to Lionel. Of course, Lionel was quite confused. He saw a man who seemed to be in his fifties or so, with greying hair, and apparently little sense of what was going on.

"I'm sorry, I don't see what you mean...?" As Lionel walked slowly into the room, he looked around at what seemed to be Mrs. Glass's room. "Are you Mr. Glass?"

The old man looked somewhat startled. Here he was, being asked by his supposed oldest son whether he was Mr. Glass or not. "Of course I am, son. What kind of games are you playing at? Here, have a tangerine." Mr. Glass offered one of the small orange fruits to his 'son', who politely declined. "Guess I'll have it myself then." Mr. Glass took a large bite out of the tangerine, which has not yet been peeled.

"Err... I'm sorry to disturb you. You seem to be completely out of your mind." Although Lionel thought his response was somewhat blunt, it didn't seem to matter. "I think I'll be leaving now." Lionel turned and quickly walked out of the room.

As Lionel wandered innocently out of this nightmare of a room, he was very pleased to see Sybil waiting for him, along with her 'job', Chris. She was apparently explaining her identity to Mrs. Glass, that she knows Lionel, and that this boy here was actually Mrs. Glass's grandson. While Mrs. Glass started talking

to her new freind. Sybil walked towards Lionel.

"I had some trouble findind the place. So you say the boy's uncle's funeral is going to be held today, right?" Sybil didn't seem to have much interest in the subject, and this talk seemed to have more of a superficial nature to it.

"Yeah... Although I don't know if he met his uncle, I figured it would be a good chance for him to meet his family." Lionel heard Boo Boo calling his name, but tried to ignore it. "Apparently his father, Lane, doesn't socialize with the rest of us."

"True... True... It also gives us some time to spend together." Although Sybil had actually said this entire sentence, Lionel did not comprehend the entire thing. For, his mother had not only distracted him, but called him over to look at something. What Lionel did actually hear from Sybil was something to the extent of "True... True..."

Sybil, being left all alone, showed that she had something in common with Lionel. She noted that there are other rooms in this house, and she also decided it was time to investigate them, although she picked a room which was very different from the one Lionel had picked.

The first thing Sybil noticed when she entered the room was that it was dark, and she could see little. This warranted her action of locating the light switch, and turning it on. Then she could see everything, and everything was definetely the word to be used.

The whole place was somewhat cluttered with belongings, most of which seemed to be the belongings of someone younger than herself. There were pairs of beds, chairs, desks, along with some other furniture, some of which didn't seem to fit. The one thing which struck her as interesting, however, was a board which seemed nailed to the back of the door, which she noticed as she closed it behind her. It had a variety of quotes, some of which she recognized.

The board, although interesting, seemed to lose its novelty rather quickly, and she turned towards the desk. Several thin pieces of cardboard were on top of the desk, with some writings scrawled on them. These piqued here curiosity. She looked them over, and the writing style seemed vaguely familiar to her, although she couldn't quite place it.

She then lost interest in the shirt cardboards, and decided to look in an old

notebook of sorts. She opened it up, and as she read the first page, she was hit by a mental lightening bolt. "Seymour Glass." she said out loud. "Did I see more glass." She then stood there, remembering all about this Seymour Glass. The one she had met on the beach, a long time ago.

At this point, she was interrupted by Zooey, who was somewhat surprised to see someone in the room. He seemed quite annoyed that someone was snooping around in his house, and immediately asked "What are you doing in my brother's room?"

"Are you Zooey Glass♣?" was the odd-sounding question which her lips formed, and threw Zooey somewhat off guard.

"What do you mean? No. I'm not Zooey Glass. I just happen to live in the Glass family's house, be the brother of Seymour, Walt, Waker, Franny, and Boo Boo Glass, and sometimes call myself Zooey Glass. Whatever would lead you to that conclusion?"

Sybil was clearly annoyed at this sardonic sort of wit, and tried her best to ignore it. "What happened to Seymour? I want to see more glass."

Zooey giggled at the last remark, but then continued. "How could you know Seymour? He's been dead for nearly twenty years now. How could you possibly know who he is?"

A tear trickled down the side of Sybil's face. "I can't see any more glass, can I?" She wiped the tear away with her left hand, and dropped the book out of her right. "Where did he die? How?"

Zooey seemed slightly annoyed at the way in which Sybil ignored his questions, but answered anyway. "He killed himself in a hotel in Florida. The idiot just shot himself. Left us all in the dark. We had no idea what to do, and still don't. Why, I just--"

Sybil cut him off abruptly by running out of the room, perhaps to the confort of the younger, possibly more understanding, Lionel. Zooey followed her out, although rather than chasing her, kept going, and left the house, to go to some unknown destination.

Mrs. Glass sat on the couch in the living room, next to her newfound child, Chris. Although her hopes were high, Chris's hopes were rather low, as he paid more attention to his book than to his grandmother.

"So, your name's Chris, right?" Obviously Mrs. Glass was not the most original conversation starter.

"Yes." Young Chris just sat on the couch, intently reading the book.

"And how old are you?"

"Seven." Chris ignored his newfound grandmother as much as she paid him attention.

"You're a lot like your uncles, you know." Mrs. Glass started moving closer to the young boy, perhaps to see what he was reading. "They all read books a lot too. They were very smart, you know."

"That's nice."

"I bet you'd like some nice hot chicken broth, right?" Mrs. Glass apparently decided to use the same strategy she always used, for as long as she could remember. She put her arms into jsut the right position to get up off of the couch, and go make some chicken broth.

"No, thank you."

"You know, all three of your uncles, and both or your aunts were on It's A Wise Child when they were younger." Mrs. Glass started searching through her pockets for something, and made a lot of racket while doing so.

"My father says that they might make It's A Wise Child into a Television show, and that I should audition for it." This little bit of conversation seemed to sap little of Chris' energy, and so he kept on reading. "I haven't spoken to my mother about it yet."

Zooey arrived at his destination fifteen minutes after he left the Glass house. It was a rather large, although hardly new-looking building, with many windows exposing its contents to the rest of the world. He walked in, and continued to argue with no less than two secretaries, until he was allowed in. He briskly walked through the halls, escorted by a doctor, to his destination. They reached a door with a small window located at head level, at which point the doctor produced his key, and unlocked the door.

"Hello Zooey" was the first thing Franny said to him. She was sitting on the floor, outfitted in a straight jacket. The entire room seemed to be padded with some

sort of cloth material.

"Hey, buddy, nice mess you got yourself into this time." Zooey took out a fresh cigar with his left hand, and lit it with his right, a motion which he praticed until perfection. "So, what happened?"

"You know perfectly well what happened. I don't know why you bothered asking. I mean, Bessie must've told you at least ten times." Franny looked on with amusement while the doctor who escorted Zooey to the room blew the cigar out without Zooey's noticing.

"Yes, but I want to hear it from you, dearest Zooey. After all, you always come to me whenever I have the slightest problem." Zooey took an imaginary drag from his unlit cigar. "Isn't that what siblings are for?"

"Sure, fine, whatever. Well, as I've told you, through much meditation, concentration, and dedication, I seem to have come up with the ability to see the future. I predicted that I would have a boy, and that Waker would move, and even that Buddy would die." Franny attempted to scratch her head, but had no such luck. "That was just fine. I was actually reaching enlightenment. The funny thing is, actually, that I can meditate a lot more easily while locked up in this cell, you know? It really not so bad in here."

"I know that, I know that. If I'd wanted to know how nice it was in a cell, or whatever you call this place, I would've tried it out for myself. That's not why I came here." Zooey seemed to notice that his cigar went out, and decided rather than discard it, relighting it would be a good idea. So he did just that. "What I want to know is, why the heck are you in here in the first place?"

"Well, that's a really interesting part to it. You see, I actually predicted that I would die a couple of weeks ago. I saw that I would be crossing the street, and then get hit by a very fast bus." Franny was still trying to scratch the itch on her head. "But it didn't happen. I'm still alive. You know, I've gotten really fed up with people. I was right back in college. Lane was an idiot. You know what he did? He saved♣ me from the bus. Just like that. He ruined fate and everything. He grabbed me, and pulled me out of the way. I can't bel--

"Oh, come on, Franny, I thought you'd know better than that. You always seem so sure of yourself. First with that thing about Jesus when you were around 9 or so.

Then the whole Jesus Prayer thing. Then that other thing with the weird hand symbols. Now this! Don't you realize you just hop around, never really taking anything for its full meaning? I thought you understood what I meant when I spoke to you on the phone. Apparently not! I don't believe tha--"

Although Zooey would have loved to stay and chat with Franny for a longer time, the doctor would have it another way. Zooey, completely frustrated, threw his cigar down and stomped out of the room. If he had looked back at Franny, he would have seen a very satisfied grin appearing on her face. He also wouldn't have known why. The doctor kindly escorted Zooey to the exit door, which Zooey utilized fully, and exitted through.

The funeral processions went fine. Rather, they went as smoothly as a Glass family funeral could. It seemed Sybil was having little difficulty with the funeral, her only problem being that she seemed somewhat depressed whenever she saw glass, which, although being somewhat of a problem, had very little to do with the funeral processions. Mrs. Glass seemed somewhat happy that the funeral was over, perhaps her own way of paying her debt to her lost son, Buddy. Mr. Glass didn't even go, for he said he'd listen to it on the radio (no, dear reader, in case you are wondering, the funeral for Buddy Glass was NOT at any time broadcast on the radio.) The rest of the Glass family had reactions similar to what would be expected of them. Mrs. Glass complained that Waker should have come, but no one seemed to know where he was.

As the family got home, everyone said their farewells, so-longs, and goodbyes, and departed from the Glass household. Zooey, Mrs. Glass, and Mr. Glass excepted, of course. Mrs. Glass turned on the television, and sat down to watch the news. While she was watching it, Zooey walked into the room. He glanced at the televison, by chance, and heard something about a hospital having a small fire. He dismissed it as unimportant, until he heard the name of the one casualty. Someone named Franny Coutell.